Iran's regime hasn't reached 'moment of fall', says Vali Nasr

Analysts fear Trump's tariff threat risks reopening rift with China

PARIS/WASHINGTON: Despite nationwide protests and years of external pressure, there are no signs as yet that one of the world's most resilient governments is close to fracture, or collapse.

Although the two weeks of protest mark the most serious challenge to Iran's regime in years, analysts say it is too early to predict the immediate demise of the regime.

US President Donald Trump's repeated threats of military action over Tehran's crackdown on protesters, follow an Israeli and US bombing campaign last year against Iran's nuclear programme and key officials.

But unless the street unrest and foreign pressure can prompt defections at the top, the establishment, though weakened, will likely hold, diplomats and government sources told Reuters.

Iran's layered security architecture, anchored by the Revolutionary Guards and Basij paramilitary force – which together number close to one million – makes external coercion without internal rupture exceedingly difficult, says Vali Nasr, an Iranian-American academic and expert on regional conflicts and US foreign policy.

"For this sort of thing to succeed, you have to have crowds in the streets for a much longer period of time. And you have to have a breakup of the state. Some segments of the state, and particularly the security forces, have to defect," he told Reuters.

Nasr said that while he didn't think the Iranian regime had reached the moment of fall, it was "now in a situation of great difficulty going forward".

Thomas Juneau, professor at the University of Ottawa, said: "At this point, I still don't assess that the fall of the regime is imminent. That said, I am less confident in this assessment than in the past." These are the key factors seen by analysts as determining whether the Islamic republic's leadership will hold on to power.

According to Paul Salem of the Middle East Institute, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has survived several past waves of unrest, this being the fifth major uprising since 2009.

The last major protests were the 2022-2023 demonstrations sparked by the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, who had been arrested for allegedly violating the Islamic dress code for women.

For that to change, protesters would have to generate enough momentum to overcome the states entrenched advantages: powerful institutions, a sizeable constituency loyal to the clerical rule, and the geographic and demographic scale of a country of 90 million people, said Alan Eyre, a former US diplomat and Iran expert.

On the other hand, Trump's latest threat – to slap a 25pc tariff on countries that trade with Iran – risks reopening old wounds with Beijing, Tehran's biggest trading partner.

The duty would see Chinese shipments to the US incurring levies exceeding 70pc, higher than the effective 57.5pc tariffs in place before Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping struck a deal in October to de-escalate their trade war.

Iran last became a flashpoint in US-China ties during Trump's 2017-21 first term as president as Washington tightened sanctions on Tehran and put China's Huawei, accused of selling technology to the Iran, in its crosshairs.

It remains unclear which countries with Iranian business links Trump might target, and he has not named China.

Some Chinese experts questioned why Trump seemed intent on revisiting one of the most contentious foreign policy issues from his first term, despite having already made Beijing think twice about providing economic support to Tehran.

"China and Iran are not as close as in the public imagination," said a Beijing-based Chinese academic who advises the foreign ministry on Iran policy.

That said, Beijing moves around 80pc of Iran's shipped oil through small independent refiners trading off the books to skirt US sanctions over the country's nuclear ambitions.—Reuters

Syrian army tells Kurdish forces to withdraw from area east of Aleppo

ALEPPO: Syria's army told Kurdish forces on Tuesday to withdraw from an area east of Aleppo after deadly clashes in the city last week, as a senior Kurdish official accused Damascus of preparing a new attack.

Syria's Islamist government is seeking to extend its authority across the country, and progress has stalled on integrating the Kurds' de facto autonomous administration and forces into the central government under a deal reached last March.

In Qamishli, the main Kurdish city in the country's northeast, thousands of people demonstrated against the Aleppo violence, with some burning pictures of Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa, a correspondent said.

Syrian state television published an army statement with a map declaring a large area east of Aleppo city a "closed military zone" and said "all armed groups in this area must withdraw to east of the Euphrates" River.

The area, controlled by Kurdish forces, extends from near Deir Hafer, around 50 kilometres (30 miles) from Aleppo, to the Euphrates about 30 kilometres further east, as well as towards the south.

On Monday, Syria accused the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of sending reinforcements to Deir Hafer and said it sent its own personnel there in response.

The SDF is the de facto army of the Kurds' semi-autonomous administration and controls swathes of the country's oil-rich north and northeast, much of which it captured during Syria's civil war and the fight against the militant Islamic State group.

A correspondent saw government forces transporting reinforcements including air defence batteries and artillery towards Deir Hafer on Tuesday.

Kurdish forces denied any build-up of their personnel around Deir Hafer and accused the government of attacking the town, while state television said SDF sniper fire there killed one person.

'Bloodshed'

Elham Ahmad, a senior official in the Kurdish administration, said government forces were "preparing themselves for another attack".

"The real intention is a full-scale attack" against Kurdish-held areas, she told an online press conference, accusing the government of having made a "declaration of war" and breaking the March agreement on integrating Kurdish forces.

"These assaults should stop," she said, adding that if guarantees were provided "for the security of the civilian population, we are ready to continue the negotiation and dialogue", suggesting the United Nations or other international organisations also take part. But, she added, "We will defend ourselves." Syria's government took full control of Aleppo city over the weekend after capturing its Kurdish-majority Sheikh Maqsud and Ashrafiyeh neighbourhoods and evacuating fighters there to Kurdish-controlled areas in the northeast.

Both sides traded blame over who started the violence that ultimately killed dozens of people and displaced tens of thousands. In Qamishli, shops were shut in a general strike and thousands protested to voice their anger at the Aleppo fighting, some carrying Kurdish flags and banners in support of the SDF and its chief Mazloum Abdi.

"Leave, Jolani!" they shouted, referring to President Sharaa by his former nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. "This government has not honoured its commitments towards any Syrians," said cafe owner Joudi Ali.

"There has been bloodshed since it took power, like the Alawi and Druze massacres," the 29-year-old said, referring to sectarian violence last year involving the two minority communities.—AFP

QAMISHLI (Syria): Kurds attend a rally in solidarity with the fighters evacuated from Aleppo following the end of a ceasefire deal.—Reuters

US ends protection for Somalis amid escalating migrant crackdown

MINNEAPOLIS: The United States said on Tuesday it would end a special protected status for Somalis, telling them they must leave the country by mid-March under an escalating crackdown on the community.

There is a large Somali community in Minnesota, the midwestern US state at the forefront of raids and searches by immigration officers, one of whom shot and killed a local woman last week, sparking protests.

In recent weeks Washington has lashed out at Somali immigrants, alleging large-scale public benefit fraud in Minnesota's Somali community, the largest in the country with around 80,000 members.

The Department of Homeland Security said on X it was "ENDING Temporary Protected Status for Somalians in the United States." "Our message is clear. Go back to your own country, or we'll send you back ourselves," it said.

"Temporary Protected Status" (TPS) shields certain foreigners from deportation to disaster zones and allows them the right to work.

In November 2025, US President Donald Trump wrote on social media: "I am, as President of the United States, hereby terminating, effective immediately, the Temporary Protected Status (TPS Program) for Somalis in Minnesota." On Tuesday, the Republican president took to his Truth Social channel to attack Democrats who lead Minneapolis, its twin city of St. Paul, and Minnesota.

"Minnesota Democrats love the unrest that anarchists and professional agitators are causing because it gets the spotlight off of the 19 Billion Dollars that was stolen by really bad and deranged people," Trump wrote.

"FEAR NOT, GREAT PEOPLE OF MINNESOTA, THE DAY OF RECKONING & RETRIBUTION IS COMING!" Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) meanwhile has kept up its large-scale migrant sweeps across Minnesota, including the city of Detroit Lakes on Monday.

The Minneapolis Police Department said its overtime bill between January 8 and January 11 was $2 million. That period marked the height of anti-ICE protests sparked by the dramatic killing, which was filmed and widely shared online. Renee Nicole Good, 37, was shot dead in her car by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer in Minneapolis last Wednesday.

Fraud allegations

Students have protested against the situation in Minnesota, including in the Minneapolis suburb of Maple Grove, local media reported. The Trump administration in recent months has latched onto news of a large-scale public benefit fraud scandal to carry out immigration raids and harsher policies targeting Minnesota's Somali community.

Federal charges have been filed against 98 people accused of embezzlement of public funds and — as US Attorney General Pam Bondi stressed on Monday — 85 of the defendants were "of Somali descent."

Fifty-seven people have already been convicted in the scheme to divert $300 million in public grants intended to distribute free meals to children — but the meals never existed, prosecutors said.—AFP

Chinese app for solo dwellers goes viral

BEIJING: "Are You Dead?", an app that sounds the alarm if a user doesn't check in every 48 hours, was one of China's top-selling paid apps on Tuesday as the country's growing class of solo dwellers flocked to download it.

More and more people in the world's second largest economy are living alone as marriage rates decline and the number of elderly empty-nesters grows.

Created by Moonscape Technologies, the app pitches itself as a "safety tool crafted for solo dwellers... to make solitary life more reassuring".

Although its blunt name has divided opinion, it had still shot to the top of the Chinese iOS store's list of paid apps by Sunday, and remained there two days later.

The Chinese name "sileme", a play on the name of a popular food delivery app, is a curt phrasing that translates to "are you dead", or simply "dead?"

With a ghost as its icon, the app takes users to a landing page where they are asked to enter their name and an emergency contact's email.

"If you haven't checked in for two days, the system will send an email to your emergency contact," a version available internationally tells users.

On the streets of Beijing on Tuesday, some of the app's target market were dubious.

Yaya Song, a 27-year-old IT worker who lives alone, said she was intrigued but that it cost too much.

"If it were free, I'd download it to try out - even charging one yuan ($0.14) would be reasonable for a trial - but eight yuan ($1.15) feels a bit expensive."—AFP

India hunts elephant that killed 20 people

PATNA: Indian wildlife officers are hunting a rampaging wild elephant blamed for killing at least 20 people and injuring 15 others in the forests of Jharkhand, villagers and officials said on Tuesday.

The elephant, a lone bull, is reported to have gone on the rampage for nine days beginning in early January, creating panic in the rural West Singhbhum district.

"We are trying to trace and rescue this violent wild elephant that killed so many people," government forest officer Aditya Narayan said, confirming the toll of 20 dead. Children and the elderly are among the dead, as well as a professional elephant handler, known as a mahout. But after wreaking a trail of destruction, it had not been spotted since Friday, despite multiple patrols in the area.

Officials said search teams, aided by drones, are combing dense forest tracts, including a national reserve in neighbouring Odisha state. Fear has driven residents of more than 20 villages to abandon their farms or barricade themselves indoors at night, elected village head Pratap Chachar said.

"A police team, or forest official vehicle, visits in the night to provide essential help to villagers," Chachar said. Hundreds of thousands of Indians are affected each year by crop-raiding elephants.

Asian elephants are now restricted to just 15 percent of their original habitat. The usually shy animals are coming into increasing contact with humans because of rapidly expanding settlements and growing forest disturbance, including mining operations.—AFP

UAE accord in the works to address Pakistanis' visa woes

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"full support" in expediting visas for Pakistani citizens, according to an official account of the talks.

In April, UAE Ambassador Hamad Obaid Ibrahim Salem Al Zaabi said visa issues had been resolved and Pakistanis could avail a five-year visa.

In January 2025, Overseas Employment Promoter Aisam Baig told the Senate Standing Committee on Overseas Pakistanis that some visas to the UAE had been "unofficially closed".

He said that the UAE had concerns about Pakistanis travelling on visit visas and resorting to begging. However, the committee's chairman, Senator Zeeshan Khanzada, said there were "no restrictions on work visas" for Pakistanis travelling to the UAE.

NA resolution on offloading

Separately, the National Assembly on Tuesday unanimously passed a resolution seeking an inquiry into the offloading of documented passengers at various airports across the country.

The resolution, moved by PPP MNA Agha Rafiullah, called on the government to investigate incidents in which passengers were stopped from boarding flights despite possessing valid travel documents. It also urged "administrative reforms to ensure transparency, accountability and the protection of passenger rights", and called for better communication so that offloading decisions are lawful and properly documented.

PPP lawmaker Shazia Marri later described the issue as "very important", saying people travelling abroad for work or education were living in fear despite having complete documentation, and urged the government to take action.

The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has linked the offloading of passengers to a crackdown on migrant smuggling, saying travellers with incomplete or unverified documents were being stopped.

In mid-December, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif took notice of the issue and formed a "special committee" to examine it. Earlier this month, Mr Naqvi directed the FIA to tighten screening of travel documents at airports.

In the first week of December, Mr Naqvi had said 50 to 70 passengers were being offloaded daily to protect the country's passport reputation — a figure that, at an average of 60 a day, would total under 22,000 in a year. However, official figures put the number of offloaded passengers in 2025 at three times higher, ie 66,000.

According to FIA Director General Riffat Mukhtar Raja, 51,000 of those stopped were offloaded due to insufficient or unverified documentation.

Trump eggs on protesters as Iran presses charges

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an internet blackout over recent days have hampered the flow of information. The UN rights office said on Tuesday that phone services had been restored but internet links with Iran remained patchy.

Addressing the blackout, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told *Al Jazeera*: "The government was in dialogue with the protesters. The internet was cut only after we confronted terrorist operations and realised orders were coming from outside the country."

Videos of nighttime clashes between demonstrators and security forces over the past week, including several that were verified by *Reuters*, have shown violent confrontations with gunfire and burning cars and buildings.

World wary

World leaders and capitals also weighed in on the tensions simmering in the Islamic Republic, as well as the confusion surrounding the protests and the possible fallout from Trump's tariff imposition.

Qatar said Tuesday that a military escalation between the United States and Iran would have grave consequences for the region, while China vowed to safeguard its legitimate rights and interests, in the context of President Trump's punitive tariff announcement.

"We have always believed that there are no winners in a tariff war, and China will resolutely safeguard its legitimate rights and interests," foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning told a regular news conference when asked about Trump's levy announcement.

Russia also condemned what it described as "subversive external interference" in Iran's internal politics, saying any repeat of last year's US strikes would have "disastrous consequences" for the Middle East and international security.

In a call with Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani, Qatari PM Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani expressed Doha's support on Tuesday for "all efforts aiming to de-escalate and peaceful solutions".

The Qatari foreign ministry said the two men had discussed the latest regional developments, without directly mentioning ongoing protests that have convulsed Iran.

In addition, the UAE Minister of Foreign Trade Thani Al Zeyoudi said on Tuesday it is unclear how President Trump's announcement of tariffs on countries trading with Iran will be implemented and whether it will impact food imports.

Sanctions

Saying that he was horrified by the mounting violence against protesters, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk urged Tehran to halt all forms of violence and repression against peaceful protesters, and to restore full access to the internet and phone services.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen also Brussels would "swiftly" propose new sanctions on Iran.

"The rising number of casualties in Iran is horrifying.

"I unequivocally condemn the excessive use of force and continued restriction of freedom," she posted online.

Underscoring international uncertainty over what comes next in Iran, which has been one of the dominant powers across the Middle East for decades, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said he believed the government would fall.

But Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi dismissed Merz's criticisms, accusing Berlin of double standards and saying he had "obliterated any shred of credibility".

'Royal family'

White House envoy Steve Witkoff over the weekend met with Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of Iran's last shah and a prominent voice in the fragmented opposition, to discuss the protests roiling that country, Axios reported on Tuesday, citing an unidentified senior US official.

Meanwhile, the widow of the deposed shah of Iran has also called on Iranian security forces to support protests.

Farah Pahlavi, 87, echoing calls made by her son the former crown prince Reza Pahlavi, said she believed "light will triumph over darkness" despite a crackdown by authorities that activists fear has left hundreds dead.

She left Iran on January 16, 1979 alongside her husband Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, just two weeks before the return to the country of Islamic revolution leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Her husband died in 1980.

Farah Pahlavi had on January 2 welcomed the protests as "filling my heart with pride", but this is her first statement since they grew into large-scale demonstrations last week calling for an end to the Islamic republic.

Farah Pahlavi was the third wife of the shah, who she met while a student in Paris.—Agencies